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# DEPARTMENT OF NURSING EDUCATION

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## SOME PRINCIPLES UNDERLYING EFFECTIVE SUPERVISION

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Supervision and supervisors have, in all fields of human endeavor, come to be very powerful factors, in industry, commerce, government, education, social service and elsewhere, yet very little has been done to find and establish broad fundamental principles of supervision upon which a supervisor might base his or her work with the hope of building up a successful practice.

The following paragraphs offer to supervisors in the fields of nursing and public health a few principles of supervision which have been evolved from a prolonged study of, and practice in, school supervision. They are offered here in the belief that, at bottom, the supervision of nurses, of teachers and of workers in other fields, will be found to involve identical elements and common problems. Indeed, there is reason to believe that because the foundations of the following principles are laid in the science of psychology, they apply quite generally to human relationships wherever one human being is striving to affect the conduct of another.

The first thesis which demands preëminence is this,—Supervision is a matter of rendering expert service to those who are supervised in response to their felt needs. In other words, the function of a supervisor is to further the efficiency of the worker supervised. Much time and energy are wasted by supervisors in trying to increase the efficiency of workers because the supervisor frequently fails to subordinate herself to the felt needs of the worker. Too frequently, supervisors go forward on the false notion that they know best what the worker needs and that this is the thing to give to the worker regardless of the worker's own attitude. This results in considerable waste and often in great disaster. Why? Because, when a worker has a felt need for a suggestion, help, instruction or guidance she not only takes more kindly to it, but she gives to it more alert, intelligent and concentrated attention. She is, indeed, eager for it, bends herself to it, throws her energies into it. In this case the worker is grateful to the supervisor, open-minded toward her, and regards her as a friend and benefactor if the supervisor has fruitful suggestions, help, or instructions to offer. The supervisor and worker thus become co-workers concentrated upon common purposes, working in harmony

and without waste of physical, mental, or emotional power. On the other hand, if there is no felt need for the offerings of a supervisor there is at best an indifferent attitude, slight attention and generally little use made of the proffered services. Quite commonly the worker does not understand the purposes and behavior of the supervisor, and interprets them as arbitrary interference or impositions to be escaped by all possible means. Out of such a situation grow disappointment, resentment, antagonism, friction and failure.

One of the first demands, then, upon a supervisor is to discover the felt needs of those supervised and, however trivial these needs may seem, to deal with them sympathetically, seriously and to the satisfaction of the worker. As the worker finds her needs being met by the supervisor in this fashion, she begins to have faith in the supervisor and to respect the supervisor's ability to supervise. Thus the way is opened to the supervisor to lead the worker into new fields of endeavor, to higher standards of work, to discover further need of help, instruction and guidance in her own professional improvement. Thus does the supervisor open to herself the opportunity of presenting to a receptive and eager worker those suggestions, helps and ideas which she feels are most needed by the worker. That is, she finds herself, now, in a position to render expert service of the highest order to the worker in response to the felt needs of the worker.

This leads us into a second principle underlying success in supervision. Expertness within a given field, based upon the best possible training and a broad experience as a worker within the field, is a prerequisite to special training for supervision in that field. That is to say, in order to meet the needs of teachers, adequately, in their professional growth, or to help them to improve their work, the supervisor must have had the training and experience as a teacher which has enabled her to solve successfully at least a part of the vast number of problems which teachers bring to supervisors who prove themselves to be helpful. Then this training and experience must be followed by further special training in supervision before a supervisor of teachers can hope to live up to the possibilities for service in such a position. So, also, will the supervisor of nurses function adequately in this capacity only where she has had the highest type of training offered to nurses and a successful experience as a nurse before she enters upon special training as a supervisor of nurses. It would not be reasonable to expect untrained supervisors to appreciate the full significance of these statements, for they have not the facts at their command which would enable them to see the full distance which lies between the services of prepared and of unprepared supervisors. But much of the disappointment and bitterness among skilled and

professional workers under supervision comes from the failure of an untrained supervisor to render service upon the highly technical and most difficult problems.

The third proposal which might well be made here is that a test of skill in supervision is the amount of spontaneous or voluntary return to the supervisor by the worker when in need of further supervision. If the supervisor has succeeded in establishing a free and friendly relationship between herself and the supervised, and if the supervisor has proven herself a real source of expert, professional assistance in case of need, the worker naturally turns again and again to the supervisor for further service. As yet no more accurate measure of a supervisor's efficiency has been found.

The greatest efficiency in supervision is secured when the relationship between the supervisor and the supervised is genuinely democratic. Then all of the attention of both workers is released from petty considerations of relative personal positions, and this attention may be centered upon the work in hand. The highest type of skillful supervision is successful democratic leadership. This means that the worker follows the supervisor from rational choice, because the supervisor has proven herself to be leading in the right direction. It means a double assurance that both will be traveling in the right direction because both will feel free, at any time there seems to be a reason, to call a halt, take soundings, weigh values, measure distances and to suggest a better procedure. Thus there will be the maximum amount of intelligence put into the direction and execution of the work. The worker will tend to loosen her full energies in the work because of the satisfaction which comes to her fundamental, instinctive desire to be a cause. Joy in one's work is dependent upon this satisfaction. The great secret in successful supervision is being able to help the worker to find joy in his work, and then again more joy, and then continually new joys, until joyful work has become the fixed habit of the worker.

Our next principle underlying effective supervision is akin in its fundamental psychology to the one just stated in the above paragraph. Supervisors can well afford to study and make use of the thought that every individual reaches his highest possibilities in any field of endeavor through interest, self-activity and opportunities for creative self-expression. Space does not permit the elaborate amplifications and applications which this thesis deserves. It is worthy a whole volume in the library of a supervisor. To be able to foster the interest and enthusiasm which the young worker brings into her work, to make way for her further growth and efficiency by encouraging the expression of her own ideas in her work, to help her to find in this work a satisfying outlet for her creative capacities, is the demand laid upon

one in the high calling of supervision. Furthermore, it frequently falls to the lot of a supervisor to revive the lost interest of a worker, to open new possibilities for creative work which will mean new life, new enthusiasm and a whole-hearted devotion to the work which can be secured by no other means. Supervisors clothed in authority have too commonly failed to provide the mental and spiritual nourishment upon which interest, high ideals and devotion to service thrive. Too often their work is a matter of mere direction, inspection and the dictation of orders. Thus the worker under such supervision works under the will of another, robbed of all opportunity to purpose or plan or to put her own brain power into her work. Her work becomes mechanical and she becomes dehumanized. Why does the artist love his work? Because his whole being,—body, mind and soul—goes into it. The supervisor who is a successful leader furnishes to her co-workers some of the possibilities which the artist finds in his work for creative self-expression.

Effective supervision can be accomplished only by educative means and methods. To have an abiding interest in one's work generally necessitates an intelligent understanding of this work not only in all of its details, but in relation to the world's work in the large, and in relation to and as a part of large social movements making for a better world. Normally to know the reasons and see the connections give a satisfaction that lifts work to a higher level of excellency. Understanding this, wise supervisors strive to share with their teachers, nurses or other co-workers all of the intellectual and spiritual aspects of the work and the larger responsibilities. In other words, they strive to educate as well as train the worker.

Effective supervision can be accomplished only by educative means and not by autocratic rule. The goal in any supervision should be a responsible, self-reliant, self-respecting, skillful, intelligent and devoted worker. In all fields of skilled work this means the possibility of further growth throughout the working life of the individual. Supervisors, then, whose business it is to further this growth will study the psychological laws which control growth, and modify their methods according to these laws if they hope for success. The reader who desires to make a serious study of the laws of growth is referred to Professor Edward L. Thorndike's three volumes on Educational Psychology. The use of the educative method in supervision means that the supervisor will make clear to the worker all of the facts in the case, not only the immediate facts but often the most remote, will explain the reasons, show cause and effect, in fact, share all of her own ideas, ideals, knowledge of fundamental principles, etc., with the worker, and thus by rational persuasion secure the whole hearted

coöperation of the worker. To be sure the supervisor does not wait until she is in a crisis to go through this slow process of education. She prepares the worker in advance for the crisis.

Suggestions and criticisms made by a supervisor will be most effective when based upon sound principles which are made clear to the worker. Such suggestions and criticisms make a rational appeal to the worker and are more likely to become a part of her own working principles. When, on the other hand, a criticism or suggestion is given in the first person by the supervisor as a matter of her own personal opinion, it may or it may not carry weight and be used by the worker. So also if the supervisor falls back upon the authority of her position and gives a suggestion or a criticism as a command, it will not function to the extent that a criticism or suggestion does which the worker acts upon because it has made a rational appeal. Once a worker acts upon a suggestion because she has accepted it as rational, the supervisor can count on that suggestion functioning every time an occasion comes up for its use, whether the supervisor is on the watch or not. Thus we might go on to show the enormous economy in supervision by an educative and democratic method versus the enormous waste in the non-educative and autocratic method.

Unless a supervisor's criticisms are constructive, they fail of their proper function. It is not enough to show a worker where her work is good or bad. To be of any real help the criticism must show her how to improve or the reasons why her work is good so that she can use the same principle for even greater improvement or in other phases of her work which may not be so strong. And this is not enough. To be really constructive, a criticism or suggestion must be put in such a way that the worker will meet it with sufficient eagerness, enthusiasm or appreciation to act upon it and find satisfaction in so doing.

An expert supervisor becomes to the worker a reservoir of helpfulness if the supervisor is constantly renewing her own strength and providing for her own growth by drawing upon deeper sources of knowledge, wisdom, and inspiration. In this connection it should be said that frequently the greatest help that a supervisor can give a worker is to put the worker into direct contact with the sources from which the supervisor has drawn her own power. Too often the supervisor tries to become the medium, and the worker gets only a paltry fraction of whatever help there was in the original source.

Finally, in order to supervise, that is, to render expert professional service to workers in response to their felt needs in the process of professional growth, a supervisor must draw freely upon the facts and principles of modern psychology, sociology and a truly democratic philosophy.